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THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
OF 1893

AND

THE CASE OF DR. BRIGGS.

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*REPORT OF THOS. McDOUGALL.*

Cincinnati Commercial Gazette, Thursday, June  
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*THOS. McDOUGALL'S REPORT.*

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**The Briggs Case—Why the General Assembly Found Dr. Briggs Guilty—Vital Points Explained and the Issues Defined—The Judicial Decision Settles the Faith of the Church—Dr. Briggs' Character Not Assailed, Neither the Sincerity of His Belief.**

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At the regular weekly prayer-meeting of the First Presbyterian Church of Walnut Hills, on June 7, Thos. McDougall made his report of the late General Assembly held in Washington, D. C. Mr. McDougall said:

Brethren—It was my privilege to attend the late General Assembly of our Church as a commissioner from this Presbytery. According to the custom of our Church, permit me to make report to you as follows:

The 105th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church held its sessions at Washington City, beginning Thursday,

May 18, at 11 A.M., and continuing daily, Sabbaths excepted, till Thursday, June 1, at 10 P.M., when it was duly dissolved. Never having attended any other General Assembly, I am unable, even if it were proper, to make comparisons with the personnel and dispatch of business of former Assemblies.

In the Assembly, as commissioners, were no less than five ex-Moderators—Drs. Smith, Nichols, Johnson, Thompson and Young. Among the ministerial commissioners were many of the most eminent pastors, scholars and teachers of our Church. In the eldership were to be found judges of Federal and State Courts, men of great experience in business, and members of the legal and other professions who had obtained more or less eminence therein. It would be difficult to find a body of men numbering 580 more decidedly representative of our great Church, and better fitted to discharge the difficult duties and onerous trusts imposed upon them. In all its deliberations it was a calm, earnest, impartial and dignified body.

#### THE WORK OF THE CHURCH.

The reports of the various Boards and agencies charged with the great work of the Church evidenced that the past year

has been one of great spiritual and material prosperity in our Church. For the first time in its history the contributions to Foreign Missions exceeded one million dollars, and this while the sum given to Home Missions was very nearly as much. The actual addition to the membership of the Church was greater than in any preceding year, and all departments of the Church's work evidenced substantial growth, and the presence and operation of the Holy Spirit in the upbuilding of the kingdom of Christ.

The theological seminaries of our Church occupied an important part of the consideration of the Assembly, and such action was taken and information given as may bring the training-schools of our ministry into closer relations with the General Assembly, and place them under more effective control. To all of us present there was great cause for rejoicing in the manifest tokens of divine favor in the record of the past year.

The Moderator, Dr. Craig, commanded the affection and confidence of every member of the Assembly. Fair, clear-headed, firm and impartial, with a large measure of God's spirit, he conducted the great Assembly in all its departments of business so as to unite all differences of opin-

ion at its close in a hearty, unanimous vote of thanks for his conduct.

Our beloved Church has stood pre-eminent in the past for obedience to properly constituted authority, for loyalty to its history; faith, for fidelity to every obligation, including the ordination vow; for implicit submission to the will, purposes and decrees of almighty God, and for an unswerving and unflinching loyalty to the Word of God. In so doing, she has wrought for the race in the past more of civil and religious liberty, and done more for the up-building of Christ-like character which rests on conviction and implicit faith in God's revealed will, than any other denomination in Christendom.

#### THE CASE OF DR. BRIGGS.

A part of the business of the Assembly was the trial of judicial cases, one of which has attained marked notoriety in the past few years—the case of Dr. Briggs. It came to the General Assembly on appeal from the judgment of acquittal by the New York Presbytery. Dr. Briggs was tried in his Presbytery on certain charges involving a violation of his ordination vow, by teaching doctrines contrary to Holy Scripture, and the essential doctrines contained in the Stand-



ards of our Church. There were eight charges in all; two of these, numbers four and seven, were not tried on their merits by the Presbytery. The trial was had on charges one, two, three, five, six and eight. One and two charged Dr. Briggs with teaching that the reason and the Church are fountains of divine authority with the Holy Scriptures. Three, five and six involved the inerrancy of the Holy Scripture, and the questions whether Moses wrote the Pentateuch, and Isaiah the whole of the book which bears his name.

Number eight involved the doctrine of the middle state, or progressive sanctification after death. On these six charges the Presbytery of New York acquitted Dr. Briggs by a majority, at the same time declining to approve his views, but holding that they did not violate the liberty of scholarship allowed within our Church. It would not be wise for me at this time to enter into any discussion of what have been called the technical errors in procedure with which the New York Presbytery was charged in the case.

#### THE TEACHINGS OF DR. BRIGGS.

It was claimed by the Church, through its Prosecuting Committee, that Dr. Briggs

had taught that Martineau, the rationalist, who denied the divinity of Christ, his atonement, his miracles and the supernatural in religion, had found God the Father through the reason, independent of the Scriptures; and that Newman, a Cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church, failing to find God in the Bible, found him in the Church, and that these two men were representative Christians, and had found salvation through the reason and the Church, irrespective of the Word of God; and this, contrary to the express statement of Christ "that no man can come to the Father but by me," and to the essential doctrine of Holy Scripture and the Standards of our Church.

It was claimed by Dr. Briggs that his language was not susceptible of the interpretation thus placed upon it by the Prosecuting Committee. On the issue thus joined, the General Assembly sustained the Prosecuting Committee, and found Dr. Briggs guilty as charged.

#### THE INERRANCY CHARGES.

As to the inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures, it was claimed by the prosecution that Dr. Briggs had stated that there may have been, and probably were, errors in the original Scriptures as they came from

God, and that he in fact claimed there were errors of history and of fact in the Holy Scriptures as we now have them, which, however, Dr. Briggs claimed did not affect the value of the Bible, nor his belief in it as an infallible rule of faith and practice. It was claimed by the prosecution that the teaching of Dr. Briggs that Moses did not write the Pentateuch was contrary to the express statements of Jesus Christ, and that his claim that Isaiah did not write the latter half of the Book of Isaiah was contrary to the express statements of God, in Holy Scripture, as found in Matthew, Luke John and Romans.

#### THE ISSUES VITAL.

The issues thus joined were, in the judgment of the General Assembly, fundamental and vital. They involved the veracity, omniscience and absolute truthfulness of Almighty God, and of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. On all of the issues joined by charges three, five and six, involving the inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures, the General Assembly found Dr. Briggs guilty, and decided that it was the doctrine of the Presbyterian Church that the Scriptures, as they came from God, were without error, and that no

errors now exist in the Bible, save such mistakes as are the work of copyists, printers and translators. That the doctrine that the Scriptures as they came from God were inerrant is essential to belief in any revelation, and that God, who never makes mistakes, and is truth itself, can not commit or countenance error or falsehood in his Word.

The General Assembly announced its doctrines on these subjects as follows:

First—We find that the doctrine of the errancy of Scripture, as it came to them to whom and through whom God originally communicated his revelation, is in conflict with the statements of Holy Scripture itself, which asserts that all Scripture, or every Scripture, is given by the inspiration of God (2 Tim. iii. 16); that the prophecy came not of old by the will of man, but that holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost (2 Peter i. 21), and also with the statements of the Standards of the Church, which assert that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the word of God (Larger Catechism, Question 3), of infallible proof and divine authority (Confession, Chap. I., Sec. 5).

Second—We find in this case involved the question of the sufficiency of the hu-

man reason and the Church, as authorized guides in the matter of salvation. Your committee recommends that this General Assembly declare that the reason and the Church are not to be regarded as fountains of divine authority; that they are unreliable and variable, and whilst they may be, and no doubt are, channels or media through which the Holy Spirit may reach and influence for good the human soul, they are not to be relied on as sufficient in themselves, and aside from Holy Scripture, to lead the soul to a saving knowledge of God. To teach otherwise is most dangerous, and contrary to the Word of God and our Standards, and our ministers and churches are solemnly warned against them.

Third—We find involved in this case a speculation in regard to the process of the soul's sanctification after death, which, in the judgment of this Assembly, is a dangerous hypothesis, in direct conflict with the plain teachings of the divine Word and the utterances of the Standards of our Church. Those Standards distinctly declare that the souls of believers are, at their death, made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory, whilst their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.

(Shorter Catechism, Ques. 37; 1 Cor. v. 3; Phil. i. 23; John xvii. 24.)

#### THE FAITH OF THE CHURCH SETTLED.

So far, then, as judicial decision and the General Assembly can settle the faith of our Church as to these doctrines, it has been settled. More or less of misapprehension and misunderstanding has existed touching the issues involved in this case. They were not questions of policy, nor of ecclesiastical government, nor liberty of scholarship; they were, in the judgment of an overwhelming majority of the General Assembly, teachings which struck at the vitals of religion, and which, having been industriously spread, came within the definition of what our Church calls heresy, and the violation of the ordination vow of Dr. Briggs. It is the faith of our Church that the Bible, in all its details, its doctrine and its history, from Genesis to Revelation, is the Word of God, without error, on which the soul of man may rest with perfect safety, as the only and final authority in all matters of faith and practice.

#### THE CHARACTER OF DR. BRIGGS.

Let us bear in mind that the character of Dr. Briggs was not on trial in this case; neither was the sincerity of his be-

lief in his views; nor was the question before the court as to whether or not Dr. Briggs was a Christian, in the sense of being saved by Jesus Christ. God alone has jurisdiction to determine the final destiny of every human soul. Dr. Briggs obtained the position of minister in our Church by subscribing to its ordination vow, by which he obligated himself to maintain the faith, the peace and the purity of the Church. The General Assembly found him guilty of a violation of his ordination vow; found that he had used the position he obtained to maintain the faith of the Church to assail it; found he was not a Presbyterian, and, in the exercise of the powers given to it by the constitution, to the exercise of which Dr. Briggs, by his ordination vow, assented, proceeded to try him, not for the violation of the moral law; not in a case involving his character; not whether he was a gentleman—but solely to determine whether his teaching was in harmony with the faith of the Presbyterian Church, which he obligated himself to maintain and teach when he voluntarily sought its ministry.

#### LIBERTY AND ORGANIZATION.

Much has been said about liberty, tol-

eration and forbearance. The question presented to the General Assembly involved the existence of the Presbyterian Church as a denomination, and its fundamental faith, and could only be tried and settled by the supreme court of that Church, which Dr. Briggs had obligated himself, by the terms of its ordination vow, to submit to. This is the law of every civil and social organization. When a Free Mason or an Odd Fellow is charged with a violation of the terms on which he has obtained admission to the organization, the question is determined, not by the person who is charged with the violation, nor by his interpretation of his conduct, but by the supreme authority or court constituted by the organization to try the case. It is not settled by outside public opinion, nor by the views of the public press. The Presbyterian Church has never taken its faith from the secular press, nor from its self-constituted advisers not within its pale. Vital to the existence of all voluntary organizations is a full and loyal compliance, by its membership, with the terms upon which they obtain entrance to it. One of my warmest personal friends is a gentleman living in another city, a Roman Catholic, a gentleman of the highest character, and for



whom I have a strong affection. But I do not regard him as a good Presbyterian, nor does he regard me as a good Roman Catholic, and this without in any way affecting the estimate each has of the other's character.

#### WHAT OUR CHURCH HAS DONE.

The Presbyterian Church has settled, so far as she can settle for evangelical Protestantism, the historic faith of the Protestant Church in the inerrant Word of God. Those who do not believe in an inerrant Bible are free as the air to assail it on the outside, by "higher" or lower or any other criticism; but no man has a right to assail the faith of the Presbyterian Church who has obtained admission to its membership, and vowed to maintain its faith. He can not rightfully use the position he has acquired by a vow to uphold the faith, to assail it in the house of its friends. This, as we have said, is not a question of policy; it is not a question of toleration; it is a question of fidelity to the ordination vow, obedience to properly constituted authority, and loyalty to the historic faith of the Church.

#### NO BITTERNESS NOR PRE-JUDGMENT.

There was no bitterness nor partiality

nor pre-judging in the trial of Dr. Briggs. Each member of the General Assembly had settled convictions as to the terms of the ordination vow he himself had taken, and as to what was the historic faith of the Church. Because he had these convictions and this knowledge, he was competent to sit in judgment on Dr. Briggs, and not otherwise. When was the judge of a court ever charged with pre-judging a case because he had fixed convictions as to what the law was governing the case, and had applied its rules in other cases than the one on trial? It is childish to talk of pre-judging this case. Only those men are fitted to be judges who have knowledge of the law, and convictions as to what it is, and those who voted against Dr. Briggs no more pre-judged the case than those who voted for him. Our beloved Church, pre eminent in the scholarship of her ministry, has afforded the largest liberty in scholarship consistent with her ordination vows and loyalty to her historic faith. She asks, and she has a right to demand, of her sons that their scholarship and their service shall be devoted to the maintenance of her faith and the upbuilding of the kingdom of Christ.

## THE SENTENCE.

The sentence of the court was suspension of Dr. Briggs from the office of the ministry of the Church till such time as he should give to the court satisfactory evidence of repentance. This sentence has been criticised by some as being too severe. In view of the declarations of Dr. Briggs in his defense before the General Assembly, that he sincerely believed in the views and teachings condemned, and would continue to teach them as long as he lived; and in view of the letter he wrote to the sub-committee of the Committee on Judgment, refusing to retract anything he had said, and adhering to all of the views he had uttered on the floor of the Assembly, no other sentence was possible if the court was to respect itself and the Church was to preserve its organization.

## HOW THE SENTENCE WAS REACHED.

The sentence was adopted unanimously by the committee of fifteen, and on its presentation to the Assembly, that body adopted it, without any substantial opposition, or request for its modification. The action of Dr. Briggs, his declared purposes and the sincerity of his belief precluded any lighter sentence. It may in-

terest you, however, to know what has not yet been given to the public, that when the committee of fifteen, appointed by the Assembly to draft the judgment, met on Thursday morning at the Ebbitt House, it appointed a sub-committee of three, consisting of Drs. Baker and Brooks and myself, to wait on Dr. Briggs, and ascertain from him his views as to the disposition of the case. That committee of fifteen unanimously agreed that the sub committee should present to Dr. Briggs, if he gave to us any indication of a willingness to accept the decision of the court, and abide by it, the following:

"The supreme court of the Presbyterian Church having found you guilty of a violation of your ordination vow as a minister of our Church, as charged in this case, in holding, teaching and propagating views, teachings and doctrines contrary to and destructive of fundamental doctrines of the faith and Standards of our denomination as interpreted by said supreme court, will you now hereby agree and solemnly promise, in the presence of God and before this supreme judiciary of our Church—on being admonished and enjoined to withdraw, in so far as you can, and to cease from uttering, teaching or in any manner

propagating the views, teachings and doctrines set forth in said charges, and as contained in said inaugural address—to express your sincere regret and sorrow for your violation of your ordination vow, and to cease from uttering, teaching or in any manner propagating said views, teachings and doctrines so condemned in this case, and as interpreted by this supreme court in this case, so long as you remain a minister of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America?”

When I stated to Dr. Briggs that the committee had authorized us to submit a paper, he respectfully declined to receive it, or to have it read, although ignorant of its contents. It is only fair to say that had Dr. Briggs, on the decision of the case by the supreme court of our Church, agreed to accept and abide by it, and cease teaching the views which had been condemned, the sentence would probably have been only admonition, and he would have been allowed to exercise all the functions of his office

#### THE ATTACKS ON THE ASSEMBLY.

The attacks on this sentence, and the action of the General Assembly, by certain ministers and theological professors,

are deeply to be regretted. No member of the legal profession would dare attack the conduct and decisions of his supreme court, as certain ministers and teachers of the ministry in our Church have assailed the decisions and action of their supreme court. If he did, he would be disbarred, and prohibited from exercising the functions of his office. Respect for and obedience to authority are essential to the maintenance of government. It is worse than childish to abuse the court that has decided a case against us, especially when that court is the one we have voluntarily agreed should decide our case. No man is forced to enter the Presbyterian Church. She is a voluntary religious organization. Every minister that enters that Church does so of his own motion, and subject to its obligations which he voluntarily assumes, one of which is that in all questions touching the violation of his ordination vow and the duration of his ecclesiastical life, and involving the doctrines and faith of the Church, the General Assembly, as the supreme court of the Church, shall finally decide. He has not had a complete trial of his case until that supreme court has sat in judgment thereon, and it is only from *its* judgment of acquittal

or conviction that no right of appeal or second trial lies.

It is, as we have said, deeply to be regretted that ministers of our Church, and especially teachers who have the molding of the future ministry of the Church, are to be found attempting to discredit our supreme court, and inciting disrespect and disobedience to its mandates. This is not liberty, but license. It is not toleration, but intolerance in its worst form. No society or government or church can exist that does not secure from its membership obedience to and respect for its authority, within constitutional lines.

#### IDLE TALK OF SCHISM.

It is idle to talk, as some have done, of schism in our midst. No man or body of men in our Church have ever been essential to her welfare. When God has served his purposes with each of us here, and called us home to himself, his Church and his kingdom will triumph, and work out their God-given destiny. My sole interest in the questions in issue was the maintenance of the historic faith of our Church. Standing face to face with the problems of sin, loss, sorrow and death, we, the creatures of a day who know not

anything apart from what God has revealed, hungering for certainty here and hereafter, and for the fellowship of the sainted who have passed on before, when the question of the inerrancy of the Word of Almighty God was raised, when confidence in that which of necessity must be certain to warrant the faith of any human soul was assailed—can you blame us who believe in God and his inerrant Word, for seeking to settle, so far as the Church can settle it, what its faith in Almighty God and his Word was and is? No God who makes mistakes, or countenances error or falsehood as his Word, or permits it to pass current as his truth, is worthy of the faith of any human soul. No heart can rest with safety its eternal destiny on a God who is fallible.

#### WHICH TO BELIEVE—GOD OR DR. BRIGGS?

When Dr. Briggs said that Isaiah did not write the latter part of the book that bears his name, that he was dead when that was written, and that the words in the latter part of Isaiah were neither written nor spoken by him; and when God, in the New Testament, expressly declares that Isaiah did write, did speak the words contained therein, the question presented was not one of science, of theology, of his-



tory or of difference of opinion, but was a clear, sharp, well-defined issue of omniscience and veracity between Almighty God and Dr. Briggs, and one which strikes at the fundamental doctrines of our faith and the value of the Word of God.

Beloved brethren, without any bitterness, but with intense earnestness for the faith on which hangs the eternal destiny of my immortal soul, and jealous of the honor and character of my God and Saviour, I have spoken and acted as I have. I close this statement with the beautiful words of Cowper, when he compares the poor cottager with Voltaire:

"Yon cottager, who weaves at her own door,  
Pillow and bobbins all her little store;  
Content, though mean, and cheerful, if not gay,  
Shuffling her threads about the livelong day,  
Just earns a scanty pittance, and at night  
Lies down secure, her heart and pocket light;  
She, for her humble sphere by nature fit,  
Has little understanding, and no wit,  
Receives no praise; but, though her lot be such  
(Toilsome and indigent), she renders much;  
*Just knows, and knows no more, her Bible true—*  
*A truth the brilliant Frenchman never knew;*  
*And in that charter reads with sparkling eyes*  
*Her tit'e to a treasure in the skies.*

"O happy peasant! O unhappy bard!  
His the mere tinsel, hers the rich reward;  
He praised perhaps for ages yet to come,  
She never heard of half a mile from home;  
*He, lost in errors his vain heart prefers,*  
*She safe in the simplicity of hers."*

God give us the cottager's simple faith for time and eternity, as the treasure be-

yond price. May the Holy Spirit so clarify our minds, so purify our hearts, so consecrate us to the service of the blessed Christ, that our beloved Presbyterian Church—Church of our fathers—loyal to her historic faith, to the Word of the eternal God, and believing in the absolute truthfulness of Him who spake as never man spake, be led on to greater conquests of human hearts, greater victories for that kingdom of Christ which is within us, and which is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

















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